

# News From the Legislature

## State Representative **Ross Hunter**

**48th  
Legislative  
District**



### Keeping in touch

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**Committees:**

Finance (Vice chair)  
Appropriations  
Education

### Town Hall

**May 19, 2005**

**6:30 – 8:30pm**

**Evergreen Court  
Retirement  
Community**

**900-124th Ave NE,  
Bellevue**

**Topic: Education,  
Health Care,  
Transportation**

## 2005 Session Report

In the closing days of the session, we passed a groundbreaking transportation package that is vital for mobility on the Eastside and Puget Sound region. We developed a bipartisan plan for our safety needs and congestion problems that have been largely unmet for over a decade.

I strongly supported this plan because our population growth is placing extreme demands on our roads that can't be solved without new revenue. I believe it is important to take action now rather than risk waiting for an opportune short-term dip in gas prices. An earthquake or severe windstorm could knock out the Hwy 520 floating bridge or the Viaduct, a disaster that would result in loss of life and cripple our economy.

I also believe we've reached a critical juncture in education. When next year's sophomores take the WASL, they will be the first class required to pass it to graduate. It is our moral obligation to assist them and future classes to succeed academically.

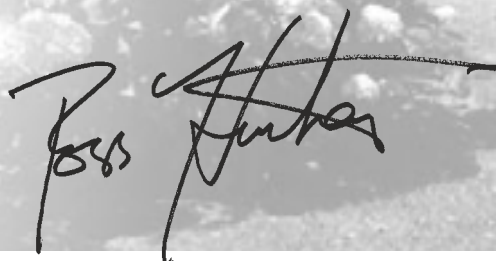
When we arrived in January to begin writing the budget, we were immediately faced with about a \$2 billion shortfall made worse by an additional half billion in losses from federal cutbacks and several court cases. Using Gov. Locke's "Priorities of Government" approach, this would mean finding \$2 billion to cut on top of the \$1.5 billion cut from the budget in the 2001-03 Biennium and \$2.6 billion eliminated from the last biennium—for a total reduction of \$4 billion over the past four years.

As we drafted the budget for the 2005-07 Biennium, I realized that another \$2 billion in cuts would do irreparable harm to this generation of students. This is why I voted for a budget that included modest revenue increases, including fixing our estate tax so that it does not go away as the federal tax does and increases in the tax on cigarettes and hard liquor. The alternative is not reasonable. We would have had to:

- Not fund voter-approved initiative 728 decreases in class size.
- Keep our enrollment in higher education stagnant, limiting the opportunities for our growing population to get an education that enables them to make a living.
- Cap financial aid, even though college costs are growing.
- Drop 17,400 people from the basic health plan. These are working adults who do not make enough to purchase health insurance.
- Deny health care to tens of thousands of children.

**The budget we passed for the next two years raised less revenue than we lost in the court cases and is below the Initiative 601 spending limit.**

I hope that I represented you well in Olympia. Please contact me with your questions, comments and ideas I can work on for next session.



### Transportation:

#### An investment for safety and congestion relief

A bi-partisan group of legislators made the responsible decision to start solving our region's transportation problems with an \$8.5 billion investment in our roads. The challenge we face is urgent and will not solve itself without bold action.

The impact of an earthquake that cripples the Alaskan Way Viaduct or Hwy 520 floating bridge will grind our economy to a halt. Existing congestion on our bridges and highways will only get worse. The latest census ranks Washington the 9th fastest growing state, with 2.5 million more people expected to live here over the next 25 years.

The state has done its part by providing a significant down payment on these projects. It is now up to the County Council to approve a regional package to put on the ballot in November 2006 to fund the remainder.

We approved transportation funding that includes a 3-cent increase this year in the gas tax, a total of 9.5-cents over four years, to fund safety projects and provide congestion relief:

- Alaskan Way viaduct replacement (\$2 billion)
- SR 520 bridge replacement (\$500 million)
- I-405 improvements (\$972 million)
- Congestion relief projects (\$1.9 billion)

The state auditor will conduct a performance audit of state transportation agencies to ensure that your dollars are used efficiently to fund these projects.



**Hwy 520 floating bridge**

### Education:

#### A commitment to students, teachers and schools



As we move towards our 2008 graduation requirement, making sure that we fund opportunities for high school students to get extra help is incredibly important.

#### Getting to Graduation

Currently only 40% of 10th grade students pass our graduation exam. We have optimistic assumptions that get us closer to 80% by 2008 based on results from other states who have walked this same path. The other states have made significant investments, particularly in helping students in secondary schools catch up if they fall behind.

I introduced the Getting to Graduation package this year because I know students, parents and educators are concerned about their children passing our graduation requirements. We have both a moral and legal responsibility to provide adequate resources for these students.

We provide local school districts with funds for after-school, Saturday class and summer school programs for children not on track to graduate. Our children will have the opportunity to receive focused attention from highly qualified teachers on skills they need to graduate. We also provide for detailed diagnostic testing to pinpoint the knowledge kids need, but haven't yet learned.

We want to graduate students proficient in high school level reading, writing and math for a highly competitive world.

#### Smart reforms for public education

We passed Senate Bill 5441, which was identical to a bill I prime sponsored in the House, that creates the "Governor's Council on Education". The Council will take a serious look at what we need to do to ensure that our children are prepared for a productive role in the economy of the future.

The goal is to reform our state's education funding structure that was designed in the late 1970s. Thirty years later, we now have a "patchwork quilt" of funding mechanisms that create a tug-of-war—attempts to fix one problem in the current system often have negative impacts on related programs. The Legislature will receive the first report with recommendations from the Council in November, 2006. The goal is to provide education funding that is relevant, structurally sound and keeps up with the fast paced society we now live in.

### A raise for our teachers

We fully funded two voter-approved initiatives—I-732 that provides a salary increase for teachers and I-728 that lowers class sizes. Several years of suspending the salary increase result in teachers struggling to keep up with inflation, higher housing costs and health care.

My bill to provide a supplement to teachers that work in districts with very high living costs made significantly more progress than it has in the past 6 years. The bill passed out of the House but died in the Senate. I will work with legislators from the Eastside and make bipartisan visits to Senators over the interim to educate them on the issue. Teachers are the most important element in the classroom and I will be very persistent on their behalf.

### Access to higher education

A college degree is part of the great American dream. Our state's higher education system will see an increase in demand of over 20,000 students by 2010. This session, the Legislature funded an additional 7,900 enrollment slots and expanded financial aid to cover families of four with an income of \$43,300.

This means that our children will have additional access to colleges and universities here in our state.

- University of Washington can enroll 280 additional students. Washington State University can enroll 370 additional students. Central, Eastern and Western Washington Universities can enroll over 1,500 additional students.
- Community and technical colleges can enroll over 4,000 additional students, including 210 more students at Bellevue Community College.
- Three branch campuses at UW Tacoma, UW Bothell and WSU Vancouver can begin enrolling 450 freshmen in Fall, 2006.

### Saving money for local taxpayers

The new capital budget invests over \$600 million in school construction, modernization and improvements. Historically the state funded over half of new school construction costs, and this budget gets us closer to that mix, reducing the demands on local taxpayers. There is a surprising amount of data showing that children make significant learning gains in brighter, safer, more environmentally friendly buildings. Bellevue will receive funds to replace an aging elementary school and modernize an existing high school. Lake Washington will be able to replace two elementary schools with state of the art facilities.

## Election Reform:

### Restoring integrity and trust

The goal of election reform is to restore integrity and trust. The Legislature approved the following reforms as recommended by a task force led by Secretary of State Sam Reed. These bills passed with large bi-partisan margins.

- Statewide database to eliminate voting in multiple counties, ineligible felons and incorrect death records. This will fix most of the problems we experienced in 2004.
- Periodic review of county election procedures will require county auditors or county canvassing boards to take corrective action to fix problems.
- Paper audit trail for electronic voting machines for recount purposes.
- Standards for provisional ballots and signatures to create consistent procedures to verify and count ballots across the state. Provisional ballots will be distinct from regular ballots by color.
- Voter identification at the polls will prevent unauthorized voting.

I am disappointed that the Senate did not act to move the primary date so that there is time to get military and absentee ballots out. This will be a top priority for next session.



## Good Government:

### Accountable to You

The Legislature approved bipartisan government accountability legislation that will save taxpayers money. I supported House Bill 1064 which requires the State Auditor to contract out for performance audits to guarantee independent assessments. The audits will result in elimination, reduction and cuts in state programs that will make government more efficient. The final reports will be posted on the internet for public review.

## Budgeting for the long-term:

### Making strategic choices

The long-term situation for our budget is painful. To have a budget that is sustainable over the long-term, we must bring the growth of all major elements of our expense stream in line with the growth of our revenue stream.

Revenue grows at about 4.5 – 5% per year. Over the last decade our expenditures on education have grown slower than this, pushing our state ranking down into the 40s in per-child expenditures. Our healthcare expenses, both to cover employees and those on medical assistance in one form or another are growing around 9% a year. This is unsustainable.

To address this we either have to significantly change the number of people we provide healthcare for, reduce the level of service to all of them, or find efficiencies that enable us to cut the rate of growth in half.

Overall Medicaid expenses are also growing very, very quickly. This includes long-term care for our parents.

To fix the growth of our health-care expenses we need to change the system nationally. This is not just a government problem – our business community faces the same problems every day.

## Consumer Protection:

### Safeguards for the 21st century

I supported legislation that increases consumer privacy and protection online. House Bill 1012 will allow the state Attorney General and businesses to seek damages up to \$100,000 per violation regarding spyware attacks on computer users. I co-sponsored House Bill 1888 that protects against fraudulent e-mails that steal personal information, known as phishing. I also supported House Bill 1185 that prevents wireless companies from publishing cellular numbers in a cell phone directory without the express consent of the customer.



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